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ABSTRACT

During the 1980s, meetings were held throughout the United States to discuss certification for technical communicators. Discussions were guided by a series of questions regarding the educational requirements and professional duties of technical communicators. In January 1983 the STC (Scientific and Technical Communication) Board authorized the Committee on Certification to survey the opinions of employers of technical communicators. In 1985, the certification questionnaire was sent to all 7300 members. In 2001, 40 undergraduate and graduate STC students responded to two of the survey questions. In the 1985 study, 1250 responses were analyzed, while 40 questionnaires were analyzed for the STC students. Survey results indicate that STC students should administer certificate programs in scientific and technical communication. In fact, 83% of the respondents agreed with this, and 95% said they would apply for the program. Over 75% of technical communication students believe they should receive certification by completing a BS in technical communication, and 63% believe that tests should be developed in different communication areas. Sample questionnaire is attached. (NKA)

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Certifying Technical Communicators in the 21st Century

STC Region 6 Conference
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STC considered certifying technical communicators in 1964, 1975, 1981 and 1982. In 1983 President Kent Cook, Jr. appointed Andrew Malcolm as manager of the ad hoc Committee on Certification. During the 1980s meetings were held throughout the United Sates. The following questions were used to guide the discussion:

> What should a certification program include? (training, experience, tests, supervised work certificates, record keeping, judges arbitrators, standing committees, etc.)
>
> Would employees value certification? (credibility: validity; reliability; basis for hiring, promoting, increasing salary, willingness to pay fees, etc.)
>
> What would a certification program cost?
>
> How many persons would apply for certification?
>
> How much would applicants pay?
>
> What would the applicants' technical communication vocation be? (writing, editing, illustrating)
>
> What would the applicants' technical skills be and should STC certify those skills?
>
> Who would operate the program? (entirely STC, entirely a contractor, or a combination)
>
> Should dues income be used to support certification or should it be self-supporting through fees?

This plan became an STC Certification Program document but was not approved by the STC board. The initial features were as follows:

1. There would be two levels of certification, regular and senior:

   Regular certification would require a combination of four years of education ands experience of which two or more years would have to experience.

Senior certification would require a combination of six and one-half years of education and experience.

2. Persons holding Senior membership would be permitted to obtain certification without monitoring of experience by STC.

3. Testing would be by discipline, i.e., writers, editors, etc. Applicants would be required to perform writing, editing, etc. to demonstrate specific skills.

Procedures

In January 1983 the STC Board authorized the Committee to conduct an opinion survey of employers of technical communicators. In the fall of 1983 the Board authorized the Committee to survey all of its members. In the spring of 1985 the certification questionnaire was sent to all 7,300 members. In 2001 I asked 40 undergraduate and graduate STC students to respond to two of the questions used in the 1985 survey, as well as answer four additional questions.

Results

The results, indicate that 1,250 were analyzed in the 1985 study, while 40 questionnaire were analyzed for the STC students. The results are reported in Table 1:

Table 1

Responses to Certification Questions

ITEMS	Responses 1985 %	2001 %
Should STC be the organization that administers a program for certifying technical communicators?	61	83
Would you apply for certification as a technical communication yourself?	71	95
Should professional with a BS degree in STC receive certification without taking a test?		77
Should educators develop certification tests in various technical communication areas?		63
Should employers develop certification tests in various technical communication areas?		41
Would you take tests to be certified in different areas of STC?		92

Discussion

The results of the 1985 and 2001 survey seem to indicate that STC should administer certificate programs in scientific and technical communication. In fact, 83 percent of the respondents (2001) agreed with this statement. Moreover, 95 percent indicated they would apply for the program. Over 75 percent of technical communication students believe they should receive certification by completing a BS degree in technical communication, and 63 percent believe that tests should be developed in different communication areas. Almost all students (92%) believe that they would be certified in different areas.

Technical Communication Certification Questionnaire

Please take approximately ten minutes to answer the following questions regarding certification programs in the technical communication discipline.

1. Do you favor certification programs for some occupations?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No

   If you answered yes, please continue with question 2. If you answered no, please continue with question 12.

2. Do you feel a certification program should include accrediting educational programs in technical communication?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No

   If you answered yes, please continue with question 3. If you answered no, please continue with question 12.

3. Which of the following technical communication programs should be certified?

Technical Writing	☐ Yes	☐ No
Technical Editing	☐ Yes	☐ No
Technical Illustrating	☐ Yes	☐ No
Technical A/V	☐ Yes	☐ No
Marketing Communication	☐ Yes	☐ No
Technical Communication Management	☐ Yes	☐ No
Document Design	☐ Yes	☐ No

4. Should Scientific and Technical Communication (STC) be the organization that administers a program for certifying technical communicators?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No

5. Would you favor a program that required periodic re-certification?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No

6. Do you believe that a certification program would benefit your organization?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No

   If you answered yes, please continue with question 5. If you answered no, please continue with question 12.

7. When considering several candidates for employment, would you favor the candidate with a certification in technical communication?

☐ Yes ☐ No

8. If a current employee obtained a certification in technical communication, would you…

Give special recognition for this achievement?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Increase the employee's salary?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Increase the employee's responsibilities?	☐ Yes	☐ No

9. Would your organization pay a $50.00–$200.00 certification fee for full-time employees?

☐ Yes ☐ No

10. Would you apply for certification as a technical communicator?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If you answered yes, please continue with question 11. If you answered no, please continue with question 12.

11. If your organization were unable to pay a $50.00–$200.00 certification fee, would you be willing to pay your certification fees yourself?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Demographics

Please answer the demographic questions below.

12. How many years have you been a technical communicator? _____ Years

13. How many years of education in technical communication do you have? _____ Years

14. How many years of training in technical communication do you have? _____ Years

15. Are you a member of STC? (Please check yes or no.) ☐ Yes ☐ No
If you answered yes, how long have you been a member of STC? _____ Years

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. Please send your responses in the self-address stamped envelope (SASE) provided. If you provide your address on the SASE, you will be mailed the results of this study.